

Some Things We Forgot or Didn't Know in the First Place

By Catherine Bullock

My thesis project began as an attempt to bring my paintings into a three dimensional space, due to the fact that space was something that my paintings were lacking. My paintings at this point were complex but closed off, illusionistic but to no real end. They were also devoid of light entirely, although I was sure that light was the key to making my work successful. The true beginning to the project doesn't lie in this original intention however, and instead stemmed from two drawing projects that happened around the same time, in which I resorted to drawing in the third dimension to attain physically the frustratingly elusive space of the second dimension of my paintings. One of these projects was an abstracted diorama of cut paper, and the other was an even more abstracted "panorama" of cut paper. What I did not understand was that the simple move from two dimensional space to three dimensional space would make me reconsider and completely redefine space in its infinite entirety. My relationship to it, and what this relationship means not only for my art making process, but for my existence as a human being would be forever changed.

The original panorama itself acted as the first mechanism with which to frame visual experience in its entirety, and was able to address both a spacial and conceptual complexity. What fascinated me most by it was the impossibility of it that happened on multiple levels. First came the obvious impossibility of seeing completely in the round. The intent of the panorama was to supply the viewer with an unhindered view of the entire horizon, however it is immediately apparent that because of the physical limitations inherent in our bodies, this is an impossible thing to do. With two forward facing eyes, we are required to rotate, resulting in only a small percentage of the entire image being visible at one time. There was also the conceptual question of inside versus outside, because the viewer of a panorama is standing in the center of

an interior, looking out onto yet another interior that is simultaneously simulating the experience of the ultimate exterior: an unhindered and elevated view of the horizon. In so many ways the panorama was a contradiction, a concept that double backed and collapsed in on itself repeatedly, and yet it continues to be a source of endless inquiry. I think this is because it is based solely on concepts of the infinite, and although it is a finite space, this is enough to maintain or at least pose its inherent paradoxes as questions.

Just as the panorama emphasizes, there are several physical limitations of our ability to perceive, and they are limitations of every degree of complexity. In addition to the simple limitation of our forward facing eyes there is peripheral vision and depth perception to consider, as well as the automatic editing of visual information that human brains execute constantly in the name of survival in the face of literally everything. This is why the nature of sight is not truly a whole image or picture, and is instead focussed points at multiple times, requiring constant shifting of the eyes to provide an accurate appraisal of one's surroundings. We do not see like a camera, that fundamentally has no judgment and captures the image in its entirety. It is also the reason that at a certain point, "far away" is no longer perceivable, and that once something has crossed this threshold in the distance, it makes no difference where it actually is because far is simply too far to fathom. Just how far is too far to fathom? Just how much (or how little) is beyond our grasp? These questions are all related to our very limited perception scale. There is only a very small range of things that we can successfully perceive, and everything that falls outside of this range is either so large or so small that it is completely lost on us. This means that the window in which it is possible to successfully perceive is already extremely narrow, but also that even the perception that occurs within this scale is also limited on multiple levels as well.

The range of devices that have been created to “improve” these limitations and enhance our abilities are valuable resources that provide insight not only on how we see, but what exactly we are interested in seeing “better”, as well as why that might be. The interesting part about glasses, or a microscope, or a telescope is that they only go so far in either direction in terms of magnification. I believe this is partly due to the fact that these machines were made by humans, for humans, and so the nature of the machine is already limited in that the creator of it is inherently limited. How could one possibly fathom something beyond one’s knowing, and then create a machine to reach and observe that particular something? Perhaps by creating a visual machine of little to no consequence, with no hope, projection, or expectation of what it will do, see, or reveal for the first time.

This is where the boxes I have constructed fit most comfortably, in between the paragraph about seeing apparatuses and the upcoming paragraphs about the infinite. The boxes themselves are visual machines. There are many of them, all with a specific method of viewing, all asking the viewer to consider their physical presence in relation to the box. They frame, isolate, and present moments, allowing them to be observable and undeniably approachable.

They function as eliminators of context, as concentrated doses of observation, that both direct but also inspire exploration. When context is eliminated they are able to stand on their own, often in a nameless state, ready for new and personalized identification. Often it is the nomenclature of our physical world that shuts things down and closes them off to further investigation. If I know that what I am looking at is a tree, I do not then consider its bark and branches and leaves, and its cellular structure and chlorophyll. In this sense I am only considering the tree as a flattened, less than two dimensional object. This is another case of the

brain editing out visual information in the name of surviving, because we obviously could not get down the street if we considered each and every tree to this degree. It is startling to think of what is missed, overlooked and flattened in the name of survival (or more commonly, convenience). Things that can operate within the specific invisibility of being flattened by its own name is just one brand of invisibility, the other brand that I am interested in is the invisibility that happens because there is no name for something to begin with. The invisibility of something that has no name directly corresponding to it, that lives under an “umbrella” name is when it is most likely to be overlooked and lost.

Something of this nature actually occurred in relation to one of my boxes, *Box 1. Box 1* allows the viewer to see their own eye floaters and extra proteins. I had a friend look through the peephole and view the series of lights that are made to appear out of focus by a lens. Being a photo major, my friend knew an actual word for the effect that occurs in a photograph where all of the lights are out of focus and make nondescript orbs or geometric shapes. He smiled a smile of recognition, taught me my lesson and then moved on from the piece. He didn't see one eye floater, nor did he stay long enough to even truly interact with the piece, all because he *taught* he knew what he was looking at.

Each nameless moment that a box is based on was personally observed. Each individual behavior of each individual lens, light, and viewfinder was personally investigated with no other motive than earnest curiosity. The entire project begins with a simple personal interaction that takes place within the space that exists between not knowing and understanding, the space right before there is a reveal and things start to suddenly make sense. Each moment has a simple visceral quality because each one stems from an instant of curiosity, exploration, and

observation. And so this process continues on to the viewer, inviting and encouraging the same inquisitive behavior.

The most exciting part of the boxes for me however, lies beyond the physical and visual exploration and understanding of them. The conversation that the physical nature of the boxes brings forward is something else entirely and so closely related to the experience of the boxes themselves that the two are inseparably linked. What tends to happen with these boxes, with the panorama construction, and even with life itself when viewed under a specific lens, is that scale begins to shift, eventually collapsing in on itself. Our very small perception scale begins to become glaringly obvious and suddenly “big” is a relative term, as well as “small”. Scale is no longer solid, it can fluctuate and reverse, collapsing in on itself and exposing the possibility that infinity is not something that exists solely expanding forever outward.

For example, I wrote earlier about just how far away is still perceivable to the human eye. Once things cross that threshold and we are no longer able to gauge where in space they are in relation to us, an interesting thing starts to happen. What was once far, or large, or unfathomable, begins to flatten. At a certain point, across a certain threshold, everything becomes one and the same. There is no longer an ability to distinguish close from far, or even small from large. Of course there is relative size, and the simple comparison of two things, but what about a mountain range? What about the sky? Or the sunset? There is no way to truly comprehend it visually, or mentally, and these are things that are visible! Consider the things that are beyond our perception scale entirely. Once the threshold is crossed and the collapse of scale begins, infinity is no longer what we know it to be, it is infinity in its truest form. It is circular or

spherical, expansive both outward and inward to a degree we cannot comprehend. The grand scale of the universe and all of its space can be found between atoms at the most basic level of existence. Space is a relative term, and cannot be grasped by us too far in either direction.

This is an exciting discovery, the collapse of scale. It means everything is anything and nothing at all; not only in the context of aesthetics, but in the context of how we go about living our daily lives. This is not even a matter of relational aesthetics, in fact it is about the importance of what is left over when one realizes the true scale (or lack there of) of their reality and their existence, and then what one does with these leftovers for as long as possible. This, to me, is a cheery and comforting thought, that we will simply never know in either direction (in any direction) and that afterwards what we are left with is all we've got, that and the absolute freedom to do with it as we choose.